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DEPARTMENT PLEASE PASS TO JOHN HILL AT OSD NORTHEAST ASIA
DIRECTORATE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/12/2016
TAGS: [PARM](#) [PREL](#) [MARR](#) [MCAP](#) [KN](#) [KS](#)
SUBJECT: OPCON TRANSFER ISSUE DOMINANT DURING OSD NORTHEAST
ASIA DIRECTOR HILL'S VISIT TO SEOUL

Classified By: POLITICAL MINISTER-COUNSELOR JOSEPH Y. YUN. REASONS: 1.
4 (b/d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: On September 11-12, DOD/OSD Northeast Asia Director John Hill visited South Korean government officials in Seoul to discuss U.S.-ROK Alliance issues. In his meetings at the Ministries of Defense (MND), Unification (MOU) and Foreign Affairs and Trade (MOFAT), OSD Hill stressed the U.S. assessment that ROK assumption of wartime Operational Control (OPCON) of ROK forces can be achieved by 2009 at low risk, resulting in bilateral command relationships that reflect actual ROK military capabilities and that are politically sustainable. During the visit, OSD Hill also told ROK officials: (1) it is important to provide training range capabilities in accordance with the early January 2007 deadline set forth in the Commander USFK's recent letter; and (2) the ROKG should produce a meaningful proposal to meet the 50-50 cost-sharing target for the SMA. ROK interlocutors uniformly expressed opposition to the 2009 OPCON transfer date, strongly favored 2012 as the target year, and indicated concern that the U.S.-proposed 2009 target may reflect frustration with the Roh Administration rather than a candid assessment of ROK capability. MND America Policy Director Chun revealed that construction of the Jikdo training range may take only four months instead of six, and hinted the ROKG will offer a more attractive burdensharing proposal at the next round of SMA negotiations in October. In summarizing the ROK position on the DPRK nuclear issue, ROK North Korean Nuclear Affairs DG Lee said the ROK values maintenance of peace and security on the Korean Peninsula even over resolution of the DPRK nuclear issue. MOU Director for International Cooperation J.R. Kim told Hill the U.S. and ROK approaches to the DPRK differed, but that good coordination between the "good cop and bad cop" approaches was needed. He assessed the possibility of a DPRK nuclear test at 50-50 and urged the USG to offer the DPRK a face-saving way to return to the Six-Party Talks, such as unfreezing some BDA accounts. END SUMMARY

RATIONALE FOR OPCON TRANSFER IN 2009 vs 2012

¶2. In each of his meetings with ROK officials on September 11-12 in Seoul, OSD Hill stressed that the U.S. is committed

to the ROK for the long-term and is prepared to keep forces in the ROK as long as they are needed and welcomed. He said the U.S. proposed target year of 2009 for ROK assumption of wartime OPCON of ROK forces reflects agreement among U.S. military commanders and civilian defense leadership that such assumption can be accomplished by 2009 at low risk. In his discussions, Hill made the following additional points: (1) the U.S. has abiding interests in the security of northeast Asia and the security of the ROK that go include, but also go well beyond the U.S.-ROK treaty relationship; (2) the U.S. is prepared to maintain forces in the ROK as long as we are welcomed and needed; (3) U.S. commanders assess that the OPCON transfer can be completed by 2009 with low risk and recommend that year on military capability grounds; (4) the ROK public and political leadership aspire to have ROK OPCON over ROK forces and the U.S. considers it important to reflect those aspirations in our command relationships; (5) deterrence and the alliance will be strengthened by establishing command relationships that reflect actual ROK military capabilities and public aspirations; (6) the same U.S. commanders who recommend 2009 as the target year would also be responsible for the U.S. personnel fighting alongside the ROK military in a contingency, and would not recommend an OPCON transfer date that they thought would put those U.S. personnel at undue risk; (7) the U.S. does not envision significant force reductions in connection with the OPCON transfer; (8) just as Kim Jong-il quickly recognized how force reductions and consolidations associated with global posture realignment produced a stronger U.S.-ROK alliance posture, he would likely see that the OPCON transfer reflected both the strength of the ROK military and the strength of U.S.-ROK political commitment to the alliance, and thus a strengthened alliance posture; (9) the U.S. and ROK should work together to address significant public

misunderstanding about the meaning of these changes in command relationships and how the result will be an alliance structure that strengthens deterrence.

¶3. ROK officials raised several reasons in arguing their strong preference for transfer of OPCON in 2012, including:

- Concern the divisive politics of the issue will further damage the Alliance.
- Worry that earlier transfer would have a negative effect on stability on the Peninsula.
- Suspicion the United States plans to abandon the ROK.
- Distrust of Roh Administration handling of ROK national security affairs.
- Doubts the ROK military has the needed capabilities.
- Time required to transform existing ROK command structures into a ROK war fighting HQ.
- Dependence upon National Assembly approval of annual nine percent increases in defense spending (2007-2011) plan.
- Clarification needed regarding U.S.-supplied "bridging capabilities."
- Related "transfer" of Armistice maintenance authority issues.
- Need to better educate the public and develop an effective public relations strategy.

FURTHER INSIGHT ON MND'S PREFERENCE FOR 2012

¶4. (C) During a September 12 meeting with Assistant Minister of Defense for Policy LTG(R) Kwon An-Do, Kwon said the alliance issues needed to be addressed on a macroscopic level as allies working toward a common goal. He attributed ROK public concern over the OPCON issue to the misperception that transferring OPCON equated to dissolving the CFC without establishing an equivalent ROK entity that could seamlessly maintain defense of the ROK. He added that fundamental misunderstanding had led many Koreans to believe that transfer of OPCON was the first step in a U.S. plan to withdraw from the Korean Peninsula. Hill stressed the importance of keeping deterrence strong and not letting differences over technical issues lead to false perceptions that the U.S. and ROK lack commitment to the larger

objectives of the alliance. He said that setting 2009 as the target date for OPCON transfer and working diligently together toward that goal would convey the strength of our commitment and enhance deterrence.

15. (C) In a separate meeting with Colonel Kim Byung Gi, the director of MND's ROK-US Alliance Transformation Team, Colonel Kim provided a more detailed explanation of three of MND's major concerns regarding an early transfer of OPCON. He said that aside from public perceptions that the U.S. is "abandoning" its ally, or that the ROKG was not up to the task of assuming wartime OPCON by 2009, the main reason the ROK could not accept OPCON before 2012 is that it lacks the organizational components needed to assume that important responsibility. Kim argued that the ROK needed to transform its existing organization into a real war fighting headquarters. He said the ROK could establish the new military command by 2008, but that it would need three more years to adequately train the command through military exercises. Kim further continued that while subordinate service commands could be completed by 2010, they would require at least two years of training and exercises to become fully functional.

16. (C) Alliance Transformation Team member Colonel Lee Jong Sup joined in to explain that MND budgetary constraints were a second major concern contributing to the ROK's preference for setting the X year at 2012. He said that a 2012 transfer is dependent upon MND's 2007-2011 procurement plan, which called for annual nine percent increases in the ROK military budget to develop the capacity needed to independently exercise wartime OPCON. Lee noted that the National Assembly had not yet approved this budget. MND U.S. Policy Division Director Colonel Chun In-Bum, who was also in the meeting, expressed doubt that the ROK military could acquire the necessary capabilities even with the anticipated increase in

the budget. Responding to Hill's question whether adoption of the 2009 date might give MND greater justification to argue for larger, accelerated budget increases, Colonel Lee claimed the ROK had not even considered the far greater budgetary increases that would be necessary for the ROK to accept wartime OPCON by 2009.

17. (C) Colonel Lee said the ROK was unclear about the U.S. pledge to provide necessary "bridging capabilities," and the exact nature and duration of those bridging capabilities. "We don't know what specific capabilities you will offer," Director Chun explained, "so we must ask the USG to provide clarification on the type and anticipated duration of those capabilities." Hill assured Colonels Kim, Lee and Chun that those discussions would be held between appropriate military experts. He also explained, when asked, that the bridging capabilities would be intended to fill a temporary gap in ROK capabilities, clarifying that other "life of the alliance" capabilities would endure as long as the ROK welcomed and needed US military support.

ARMISTICE MAINTENANCE

18. (C) On the related issue of responsibility for Armistice maintenance, MND ROK-US Alliance Transformation Director Kim voiced his concern with the fact that the DPRK does not recognize South Korea as a legitimate military counterpart, and is therefore unlikely to engage with ROK generals in the context of the United Nations Command. Dismantlement of the Combined Forces Command (CFC) structure would destroy the UNC channel for communication with North Korea, unless agreement is first reached on an adequate replacement mechanism, Kim warned. He suggested the United States and ROK work to reach an agreement regarding the future UNC role before the next round of the Security Consultative Meeting (SCM) in October.

MOFAT, MOU LIKEWISE PREFER 2012

19. (C) The OPCON transfer issue similarly dominated OSD

Hill's discussions with MOFAT and MOU officials on September 11. According to Kim Hong-kyun, MOFAT Senior Coordinator for ROK - US Security Cooperation, the public is largely uninformed or misinformed about OPCON transfer. Kim commented that while the wartime OPCON transfer signifies a natural evolution of a "matured alliance," many in Korea oppose OPCON transfer because they lack sound information. Kim shared his concerns about negative reports in the "conservative media" on the upcoming Presidential summit. While a successful summit "will put OPCON to rest," Kim saw the need for both countries to think about "how we can better sell" the eventual OPCON decision to the Korean public. Kim proposed the United States and ROK work together to develop common talking points or even a press release.

110. (C) Senior Coordinator Kim opined that there are two groups opposing OPCON transfer. The first group is against it in principle and will be unhappy no matter what timeline is decided. This group spoke out against the OPCON transfer earlier than any other opposition groups. The second group, however, favors the transfer of OPCON in principle, but disagrees on the timeline. According to this group, OPCON transfer would "eventually" become feasible, Kim explained. However, given the current political and security atmosphere, they firmly believe transfer should be postponed. Lee Jeong-kyu, Director of MOFAT North America Division III, who joined in the meeting, stated that the groups opposing OPCON transfer are gaining more influence with the public, but remain poorly informed about the issue. Lee accused these uninformed groups of "negatively affecting stability of the peninsula and contributing to the weakening of the alliance." Sighting a concurrent shift of opinion in the National Assembly, Lee predicted that the second group, which argues the timing of the OPCON transfer, would strengthen.

111. (C) Senior Coordinator Kim argued to Mr. Hill that a greater emphasis should be placed on setting a "target year," rather than a "fixed year." Kim stated that the

implementation of the target year should also be incremental and conditional, which he said would build more confidence among the public and win the support of the former generals who have openly opposed an early transfer of wartime operational control. Otherwise, he warned, the opposition groups will "hang around the issue forever," possibly elevating OPCON transfer as the main focus of next year's ROK presidential election. Echoing MND views, Kim concluded that 2009 is simply "too early." He noted that diplomats and politicians should not have a final say in the OPCON transfer date, and emphasized the need for the military-to-military only discussions. "It is dangerous to politicize this issue," Kim warned.

112. (C) MOU Director for International Cooperation J.R. Kim accepted OSD Hill's message that the transfer of OPCON was prudent and appropriate based on ROK military capabilities and acknowledged that the crafting of an effective message to the public would be key to the successful transfer of OPCON. However, he expressed deep concern with the future of the alliance and feared that the United States was pushing an early transfer of wartime OPCON out of a deep negative emotional reaction to ROK President Roh Moo-Hyun.

113. (C) In a separate meeting on September 11 with Lee Yong-joon, MOFAT Director General for North Korean Nuclear Affairs, Ambassador Lee echoed many of the aforementioned concerns regarding early transfer of wartime OPCON and urged the USG to "listen to the Korean public, as well as the Korean government." When Hill asked which voice is the single voice of the Korean people, Lee acknowledged that there are many Korean voices. Lee agreed with Hill that the best way to approach the numerous difficult issues between the ROK and the U.S. was as partners focused on a long-term friendship and alliance, rather than on short-term difficulties.

¶14. (C) Turning to North Korea, Ambassador Lee gave Hill a summary of the ROK position on the DPRK nuclear issue. He said the ROK has two priorities with respect to the DPRK -- maintaining peace and security on the Korean Peninsula and peaceful resolution of the nuclear issue. "These can conflict. And when they do the ROK public might choose number one," Lee cautioned. Ambassador Lee highlighted three aspects of the DPRK issue: 1) The need for the DPRK to return to 6PT, where there is no difference between U.S. and ROK positions; 2) Implementation of UNSCR 1695, where the ROKG fully supported implementation; 3) Reaction to a possible DPRK nuclear test, which Lee said was still under discussion internally, but predicted the ROKG response would be totally different from its response to the missile tests. That is because the ROKG considered a possible DPRK nuclear test as a serious threat to the region as well as an affront to the Nonproliferation Treaty, Lee explained, adding that he was still "working on the issue with relevant ministries" (which could imply that resistance from the Ministry of Unification remains).

¶15. (C) Later that morning, MOU's Director for International Cooperation, J.R. Kim told OSD Hill that the U.S. and ROK approaches to the DPRK differed because the ROK wanted to work on improving the DPRK "from the inside" -- to gradually build up the DPRK's dependency on the ROK -- while the U.S. worked on the DPRK "from the outside." Hence, good coordination between the "good cop and bad cop" approaches was needed. Kim noted, however, that following the 5 July missile launches the ROK's efforts to engage the DPRK had stalled as the DPRK refused government-to-government contact, even to the point that the DPRK refused to grant MOU officials access to the Kaesong Industrial Complex. Kim emphasized that despite the lack of official contact, the ROK hoped that growing inter-Korean trade and ROK humanitarian aide to the DPRK would encourage the DPRK to restart dialogue in non-political areas such as family reunions and cultural exchanges.

¶16. (C) Regarding the possibility of a DPRK Nuclear Test, Kim assessed there was a 50-50 chance that the DPRK would conduct one, but said there was little the ROK could do to prevent such a test. Kim thought a China-DPRK summit meeting would likely follow the ROK-U.S. summit meeting and emphasized that it was important to work with China and the international community to resolve the issue. Kim urged the U.S. to offer the DPRK a face-saving way to return to the 6PT, such as unfreezing some BDA accounts.

OTHER ALLIANCE ISSUES

¶17. (C) JIKDO: Although Mr. Hill's Korean interlocutors focused their discussions primarily on the OPCON issue, ROK views on other Alliance matters -- specifically the Jikdo training range and the burdensharing negotiation (SMA) were raised during a candid lunch with MND America Policy Division Director, Colonel Chun In-bum. Chun explained that while MND intended to inform the U.S. officially that construction of the replacement air-to-surface training range at Jikdo would take six months, the engineers had built-in a one month cushion for weather delays and another for testing of the weapons scoring system that could, "if all goes well," result in a functional range within four months time. OSD Hill said four months would be better than six, but stressed the ROK must do everything possible to meet the USFK Commander's early January deadline for completion of the range.

¶18. (C) SMA: OSD Hill also strongly urged his ROK interlocutors to come back to the SMA negotiations with a meaningful proposal to meet the 50-50 goal we have set. In their response, MND officials deferred to MOFAT's lead in the negotiations, while MOFAT officials pointed the finger at the Blue House. MND Asia Policy Director Chun hinted over lunch that the ROK side would bring a better offer to the next round of negotiations (October 10-11) but declined to elaborate on the details.

¶19. (U) This message has been cleared by OSD Hill
VERSHBOW